"On Possibility of Dis/Ability in Husserl’s Phenomenology"

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Introduction

• In this talk I shall examine how far we can develop the phenomenology of Dis/Ability based on Husserl’s phenomenology. I intend to neither stay rigidly within the framework of Husserl’s phenomenology, nor go far beyond it. I’ll examine carefully the possibility of Husserl’s phenomenology on the problem of dis/ability.

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In his “Fundamental Phenomenological Outlook” of Ideas Vol.1 (1912) Husserl described his idea of “natural standpoint” by using Cartesian word “cogito”, but he immediately paraphrased it with “the fundamental form of all ‘wakeful (actual)’ living” (III, 59) and, instead of “ego sum, ego cogito” he wrote “I am, this life is, I live: cogito” (III, 97) and called it “the flowing life” (ibid.).

What is “living” and “life” in this context? Usually we would answer, living means breathing, eating, drinking, discharging, sitting, walking, etc. These actions are related to physical sides of living and can’t happen without my body. Living means further feeling, willing, thinking, remembering, expecting, etc. These actions are related to mental sides of living. We would also say that living means talking to others, listening to others, discussing with others, playing something with others, etc. These actions have a physical and mental relationship to others.

Generally speaking, whereas bodily actions are performed in the space and the time, mental actions are performed mainly only in time, but sometimes in space as well. Life has not only spatial aspects in the expanse, but also temporal aspects in the flowing. Therefore Husserl understood the term “cogito” in a wider sense than Descartes, and Husserl didn’t draw out the body-mind dualism from “cogito” by seeing only the mental aspect in “cogito”, but grasped both aspects of life in it. When he talked about “intentionality” as a fundamental idea of phenomenology, he used often the word “consciousness”, e.g. “We understand under intentionality the peculiarity of lived experience (Erlebnis) to be ‘consciousness of something’” (III, 188). However later, e.g. in his manuscript for To The Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity (1920, XIII, 71 et passim) or in his lecture The First Philosophy (1923, VIII, 120 et passim), he paraphrased it with the coinage “consciousness-life” (Bewußtseinsleben). Thus he had a tendency to use the word “life” or “living” instead of “thinking” for “cogito”.

I’ve just mentioned Husserl’s usage of words all ‘wakeful(actual)’ living” instead of “cogito”. What does it mean? He thought that “cogito” in a narrow sense is performed in “actuality”, but “cogito” in a wider sense includes “inactuality (potentiality)” as well. He wrote: “Cogito” means “I have a consciousness of something. I perform an act of consciousness.” In order to keep this fixed concept we reserve the Cartesian expression of cogito.” (III, 73) Cogito in a narrow sense means for him only such a performative act in actuality, but doesn’t cover all lived experience or consciousness-life in actuality as well as potentiality. So, he wrote: “If an intentional lived experience (Erlebnis) is actual, the subject in it is directed to the intentional object. An immanent ‘looking at’ belongs to cogito itself” (ibid.) But immediately he added: “The actual lived experiences are surrounded by a ‘garden(Hof)’ of inactual lived experiences. The stream of lived experiences can’t composed only of actuality.” (ibid.)
• In this context he introduced the important words such as “garden”, “background” and “horizon”. He wrote: “The actually perceived, the more or less clear present together is partly accepted and partly surrounded by a darkly being conscious horizon of undefined reality. … The undefined surroundings are infinite. There is necessarily a hazy and never fully defined horizon.”(III, 57) Or, in other words including an example: “The grasping is a grasping out, each perceived thing has a background of experience. Around the paper there are books, pencils, inkpot, etc. in a certain sense of ‘perceived’ there in the field of intuitions. … Every perception of thing has a garden of institution of background. This is a ‘consciousness-lived-experience (Bewußtseinslebnis)’, or in a word ‘consciousness’ as well.”(III, 71) The fundamental concept of intentionality is now understood in a wider sense, and such understanding includes the concepts of actuality and potentiality. Therefore Husserl wrote: “Even if the intentionality is not ‘performed’ in the special modality of actuality, it can be already ‘stirred’ in the ‘background’ without being performed.”(III, 189)

• Regarding the first point I would like add some passages from this lecture as follows: “The thing has more than the perceived or appearing front side in the sense of perception. … Original appearance and unoriginal appearance are not separated, but united in the appearance in the wider sense.”(XVI, 50) “To the appearance it belongs that the visible points out the invisible.”(XVI, 245) “The things are seen and with the seen things the Between (Zwischen) is grasped. … The space is therefore rather seen together.”(XVI, 261f.) But now I would like to go onto the second point.

• How is the perception of “background” or “horizont” in potentiality possible? Take this example, there is a house in front of me. I am looking at the front of the house and from here I can see neither the side nor the back of it. But if I can go around, I can see both. Even if I view it from here, I can imagine it and see the house already with background of the side and the back. How is this possible? This question brings us to the problem of “my lived body(mein Leib)” in Husserl’s phenomenology. Already in his lecture Thing and Space (1905), seven years earlier than Ideas Vol.1 (1912), He mentioned the idea of “I as lived body(Ichleib)” (XVI, 10, et passim). There are two relevant and important points which he developed in this lecture: On the one hand: “Perception of things is perception of what is grasped out from the background.” This is the point I have just mentioned in Ideas Vol.1. On the other hand: “Perception has a relationship to my lived body(Ichleib).”(XVI, 10)

3. “My lived body (Ichleib)”
In this lecture *Thing and Space*, Husserl developed the idea of “my lived body” as follows: “A perceived thing is not alone for itself, but stands before eyes midst a certain intuitive circumstance of things. For instance the lamp stands on the table midst books, papers and other things. The physical circumstances is similarly perceived. … My lived body (Ichleib) belongs to these things which are perceived together.” (XVI, 80) Everything around me is relate to my body. “It [The lived body] stands there as the always staying point of relationship. … It defines right and left, front and back, above and below. It takes a special position in the perceived world of things.” (ibid.)

He emphasized the peculiarity of my lived body among other things around me. “On the one hand the lived body is a thing as well, a physical thing as other things. … It is a thing midst other things. On the other this thing is just lived body, bearer of I. … The constitution of physical things is intertwined with the constitution of my lived body (Ichleib) in a strange correlation.” (XVI, 162) Because my lived body takes a special position and is located in a special place (here), a thing lying far away can be seen only as a small thing in a distance and only in one side. If I can approach to it and go around it, I am able to see it in details and with multiple sides, and in some case look into it, touch it and analyse it, and then I see what the thing originally is. (cf. XVI, 115f.)

In order to see a thing in details, “the thing must be turned or pushed, or I must move me, my eyes, my lived body, go around it, approach it and go off.” (XVI, 155) My lived body is not a simple thing among other things, but is an “organ” with which I can see, hear, feel, smell, go and move. It is an organ of my perception. “The eyes can move, the head, the upper body, etc, as well. … Important is the “moving itself”, which is expressed in the kinesthetical senses.” (XVI, 158) The term “kinesthese” was also an important coinage composed of “kinesis(movement)” and “aesthesis (sense)” which Husserl borrowed from the contemporary psychology and changed it into a phenomenological concept. That is, to speak, no senses I feel at things, but senses I feel with my moving my own lived body.

He wrote: “The touching hand ‘seems’ as having sense of touch. Directed to the touched object smoothness or roughness seems as belonging to it. I look after the touching hand, it has the sense of smoothness of roughness, and it has them at the appearing fingertips. … If I touch the right hand with the left hand, the appearance of the left and right hand constitutes itself alternately with senses of touch and kinesthese, the one moving on another.” (XVI, 162) He continued: “Here is important that the constitution of physical things is intertwined with the constitution of my lived body (Ichleib) in the strange way.” (XVI, ibid.)
• Husserl developed the idea of “lived body” further about ten years later in the manuscript of Ideas Vol.2. "The lived body (Leib) is the medium of all perceptions and the organ of perception. It is necessarily present in all perceptions. The eye is directed to the seen in the seeing and runs over the corner, the area etc. The hand slides over the object by tasting. I approach the ear by moving in order to listen to." (IV, 56) The lived body is no dead body or thing, but the living body which is functioning in the center of my perception. "The lived body becomes the bearer of the point of orientation, the zero point, and of here and now, from which the pure I gets intuitions of the space and the whole world of sense. Therefore each appearing thing has in itself a relation of orientation to the lived body, and not only the really appearing thing but also each thing which can appear." (ibid.) "I have all things oppositely, they are ‘there’ - with a sole exception of the lived body which is always ‘here’." (IV, 159)

• Because my lived body stays in the center of my perception, even if I move with it. "Whereas I have against every other things the freedom to change my stand point to them voluntarily, I have no possibility to remove me from my lived body. Therefore, the variety of possibilities as to how the lived body may appear is limited. I can see only the certain parts of the body in a special shortening of perspective and the other parts (i.g. the head) are unseen at all for me. The same body which serves me as medium of all perceptions stands me on my way of perception and is a strangely imperfectly constituted thing." (IV, 159)

• In this context we encounter the famous passage because Merleau-Ponty who read Husserl’s manuscript of Ideas Vol.2 at the Husserl Archive in Leuvan quoted in his Phenomenology of Perception as follows: “I have appearance of touch by touching the left hand. Namely I don’t only feel, but perceive and have appearance of a soft and such and such formed smooth hand. … But by touching the left hand, I find there a series of senses of touch which are localized there. … If I speak of physical thing ‘left hand’, I ignore these senses. … If I add them to it, the physical thing doesn’t get rich, but it becomes lived body, it senses." (IV, 145) Lived body is living body which senses and moves, and with which I can sense and move.

4. “I can”
In connection with the idea of “lived body (Leib)”, Husserl often used also “I can (Ich kann)”. E.g. in Ideas Vol.2: “The subject has “ability”(I can) to move the lived body freely and to perceive the outer world through it.”(IV, 152) In the paragraph 59 titled with “The I as subject of ability(Vermögen)”, Husserl wrote: “The I as unity is a system of ‘I can’. There it is to distinguish between the physical and the physical mediated ‘I can’ and the mental ‘I can’. I have an ability on my body, am the one who moves and can move this hand. I can play piano.”(IV, 253f.) Nevertheless, it doesn’t mean that I can do it always, but sometimes I can’t do it. He continued: “But it doesn’t work always. I forgot playing it again and am out of practice. I learn my body. ... But if I am ill for long time, I must learn going and come into it soon. But if I am mentally ill, I lost control of parts of my body. ‘I can’t’. In this sense I became an other.”(ibid.)

Husserl continued: “At last everything is sent back to primary ability (Urvermögen) of subject and then to acquired ability, sprung from the earlier actuality of life. The personal I constitutes itself in the original genesis not only as impulsively defined personality, from the beginning and always impelled by original ‘instincts’ and following them, but also as higher, autonomous, free active, especially lead by motive of reason.” (IV, 255) He initiated the idea of genetic phenomenology which was developed later.

In this context Husserl discussed many issues regarding “ability” also in relationship to actuality and potentiality, as follows: “The mental I can be grasped as an organism of ability(Vermögen) with it’s development in a normal typical style, namely with steps of children, youth, ripeness and elderly. The subject ‘can’ be various and is defined according to it’s ability through stimulus and actual motive to do. It is always active according to it’s ability and changes, gets rich, strong or weak always through it’s doing. The ability is no empty ‘can’, but a positive potentiality which comes into actuality and is always ready to go to activity.” (IV, 254f.) I am not always able to do something and I change from potentiality to actuality and visa versa, and change from inability to ability visa versa.

Husserl characterized “able / capable” as a practical possibility and said: “What I can, am able to, am capable for; what stands for me consciously, is a practical possibility.” (IV, 258) Then he continued: “In the experience the ‘I can’ and “I can’t” are distinguished according to it’s phenomenological character. There is an action without opposition or a consciousness of ability without opposition, and an action with overcoming of opposition. ... There is a degree of opposition and power of overcoming. The opposition can be irresistible. Then we are pushed to ‘it doesn’t work’, ‘I can’t’, ‘I don’t have the power’.”(IV, 258f) Husserl mentioned here our today’s theme of “ability and disability” which I have according to the situation.
5. “Capability” (Vermöglichkeit)

In this context Husserl discussed “can” and “ability” in various passages, e.g.: “All my ‘can’ (Können) in the physical sphere is mediated by my ‘bodily activity (Leibesbetätigung)’ and by my physical ‘can’ (leibliches Können) and ability (Vermögen). Through experience I know that parts of my lived body move in the original way which is distinguished from all other things and movements of things, namely in the character of subjective movement, ‘I move’ (Ich bewege).” (IV, 259)

However, I’m not always able to do something, or sometimes am unable or disable to do a certain thing, e.g. as follows: “My hand falls asleep. — now I can’t move it. It is benumbed temporarily. I experience the same in the area of outer ‘following’ of bodily movement. The hand puts aside something that stands on the way, ‘it works’. Sometimes it works ‘with difficulty’, ‘with less difficulty’, ‘without resistance’ and it doesn’t work sometimes. The opposition is unovercoming inspite of all endeavours.” (Ibid.) Then he concluded as follows: “It is of importance to bring out the contrast between the possibility in the sense of mere ‘logical’ possibility and the practical possibility of ‘can’ (Können) with examples.” (IV, 261)

Husserl talked later, e.g. in The Crisis of European Sciences (1938) (VI, 164 et passim), about this practical possibility of the “can” or possibility based on ability with his coinage “Vermöglichkeit”. This is a compound word composed of “be able to (Vermögen) and possibility (Möglichkeit) and I would like to translate it with the English word “capability”. If I can make a bridge between the idea of the “lived body”, “horizon”, “potentiality” and “capability”, I would say, inactuality of horizon means potentiality and possibility, e.g. “I can go further”. It is no empty logical possibility, but the “capability” (Vermöglichkeit) motivated by “I can go” with my kinesthetic lived body. The horizon is thus a “playing space” (Spielraum) of the possible and physical experience. It has a relationship to “my lived body (Ichleib)” as the “zero point” of orientation and perspective. Although I borrowed this word from Martha Nussbaum, I don’t have enough time to elucidate the relationship and the gap between Husserl’s “Vermöglichkeit” and Nussbaum’s “capability”. Nevertheless I would like to mention it shortly again at the closing word of this talk.
• It means, however, that the horizon is not only opened by capability, but also is limited by or depends on my capability of e.g. “I can go”. If I could add the above mentioned genetic phenomenology to this point, I would say that this horizon has diversity according to the steps of my development from childhood, youth to elderly and my conditions as healthy, sick, fatigue, awake or asleep. And each of us human beings has a different ability or disability, a different way of going, seeing, hearing and smelling. We all have different horizons, and how they differ depends on our own dis/ability.

6. “Normality and abnormality”

• In this context Husserl sometimes mentioned the dichotomy of the “normal / abnormal”, and “normality and abnormality” which he used in his posthumous manuscripts To Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity (XIII-XV). We should examine this dichotomy carefully, because he introduced it in order not to discriminate, but to develop his genetic phenomenology. He wrote: “Abnormality is a modification of normality, stands out from it, and comes to it. ... Each subject has his normality within which abnormality emerges as a certain style of disturbing” (XV, 154) He continued: “Normality has various forms and steps which belong to the constitution of human beings where he or she “becomes” him- or herself and from child to normal ripe man or woman.” (ibid.) “Child” could be characterized as abnormal only in contrast to ripe normal adult. Abnormality is a relative concept which can be defined in contrast to normality.

• Abnormality as well as normality has various steps. Husserl wrote: “The steps of normality and abnormality correspond to the steps of constitution of beings. The world constituted in the normality is constituted as world including the abnormality. ...Each normal subject has occasionally abnormal deviations from his normal experience.” (XV, 155) As examples of abnormality Husserl sometimes uses the terms “children”, “crazy”, “disease”, “sleep”, “loss of consciousness” and “animals”. He introduced these examples not in the sense of discrimination, as something apart from normality, but as various “modifications”, “steps”, “changes” of normality. We ourselves could be developed from such abnormality and could fall into such abnormality.
Therefore he introduced the genetic method which he called “Abbau” (XV, 133) and could be translated with the English word “deconstruction”. According to this method, by imagining a step where some dimension of normal constitution of world lacks, we can imagine the world of above mentioned abnormality such as “crazy”, “disease”, “sleep”, “loss of consciousness”, etc. This is so to speak a method to understand the abnormality as a modification of normality. Husserl understood the dichotomy of normality and abnormality rather in relativity. He wrote: “Abnormal people are only abnormal regarding to a definite layer of characteristics of normal common world, whereas they have experience otherwise in total harmony with normal people and are normal in other points.” (XV, 158)

We could understand this relativity of normality and abnormality from the point of view of ability and disability. Normality is characterized by ability by which someone is able to do something as normal people, whereas abnormality is characterized by disability by which someone is disabled, and that disability prevents them from doing something as normal people. If I fall in the situation of abnormality, I'm not able to do what I was able to do in my normality. Husserl wrote in a text: “I become somehow sick. From the inner side I have a lived experience as abnormal. Because of continuing of bad feelings I get consciousness of weakness such as disability for moving in a normal way, performing my familiar ability and gathering my thoughts. I feel the disappearance of my consciousness.” (XLII, 2)

In my abnormal situation of sickness I lost my ability I have in normal situation. As said, my ability could open my horizon and “life-world” as “horizon of horizon”, whereas my lost of ability namely my disability could limit my “life-world”. The extent of my “life-world” depends on my ability and disability.

As other examples for normality and abnormality Husserl introduced “adult” and “children”. This should be understood in terms of development and the genetic phenomenology. Genetic phenomenology should cover not only issues of development and genesis, i.e. how we get ability and normality, but also issues of ageing and losing them, i.e. how we lose ability and normality and fall into disability and abnormality. And what is interesting for me is that he introduced the issues of “birth and death” (XV, 138 et passim) in this context, namely as an extreme pole of abnormality. He characterized both extreme cases as “problems of border” (cf. XLII) with which the phenomenological method can’t cope well. He asked himself: “Now it is important to set world, birth and death seriously in the essential relationship and to show how far they are not only a fact and how far a world and humans without death is unthinkable.” (XV, 172) I myself am also interested in the issues of “ageing” because Husserl wrote: “Also I myself will die -- like I was once born, developed into adulthood and got old. But the question is, what this means.” (XXIX, 332) However these themes would go beyond today’s theme and should be discussed in another chance.

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Closing words:
Intersubjectivity of dis/ability
• In ending this talk I would like to mention the theme of intersubjectivity of dis/ability in Husserl’s phenomenology. As said previously, he discussed normality and abnormality in relativity, namely we can talk about normal and abnormal only in relationship to each other. Then we should discuss the contrast between ability and disability in relationship to each other as well. Dis/ability is not a characteristic which individuals possess by him- or herself without any relationship to each other. I've tried to translate Husserl's coinage “Vermöglichkeit”, i.e. possibilities based on ability with “capability” which I borrowed from the American philosopher Martha Craven Nussbaum. Also this concept should be understand not as something belonging to individuals, but something characteristic of relationships or circumstances where individuals are living. Although we can’t find in my opinion so much passages leading to this thought in Husserl's text, it is important and remarkable that he discussed issues of dis/ability in the context of phenomenology of intersubjectivity.